

Liberal Confusion Persists on GM Flax:

Is the biotech industry deliberately misleading Members of Parliament?

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Action Network, www.cban.ca/flax*

In the admittedly complex story of Canada's GM flax contamination crisis, Liberal MPs have lost the plot. Or have they been misled?

Escalating pressure from the biotech industry to stop Bill C-474 could be leading some Members of Parliament astray. Despite the clear fact that genetically modified (GM) "Triffid" flax was approved for sale in Canada in 1996 and then "deregistered" in 2001, some Liberal MPs are incorrectly stating that Triffid was never approved for sale in Canada.

Correcting this information is vital to understanding the link between the current GM flax contamination crisis and the need for Bill C-474. Perpetuating this false information feeds into the hands of an industry is fighting against any debate on the Bill.

Bill C-474 would support Canada's farmers by requiring that "an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted." In September and October 2009, GM contamination in Canada's flax exports shut down our markets.

MPs need to understand that **the GM flax called Triffid was approved for sale in Canada via variety registration in 1996, making it legal to sell the seeds in Canada.** (Variety registration was granted after Triffid was also approved for environmental safety and for animal food, but before it was approved for human consumption.)

Variety registration remained intact until April 1, 2001 when it was removed at the behest of flax farmers. In 2001, the last of 200,000 bushels of Triffid seed was collected and crushed, meaning that GM flax seed was still being reproduced or stored up until that point. That is almost 5 years of commercial status and contamination risk.

The history of GM flax clearly shows the need for Bill C-474.

GM Triffid flax was developed (at the University of Saskatchewan) without a mandate from flax farmers, and these farmers knew it would destroy their European export market - which represents 60-70% of our flax exports.

Flax farmers took the only step they could to remove Triffid from the market; they pressured the University that developed the seed and owned the patent, to have it deregistered. This was not an easy road for flax farmers but official deregistration finally happened on April 1, 2001.

If Bill C-474 had been in place by 1996, GM flax seed may never have been permitted for sale and the current flax contamination crisis could have been prevented. The government would have had a mandate to assess the potential economic harm that GM technology in flax could cause. Instead, flax farmers were put in the position of trying to argue their case and find a way to take the GM seed off the market before the inevitable happened.

A point that may be adding to confusion is the fact that, though it was legal to sell the GM flax seeds in Canada from 1996-2001 and the seeds were being reproduced, the GM flax was not actually grown on a commercial scale. The Triffid seed was being reproduced for future commercial production. The unfortunate fact remains however that the seed was legal to sell, was being grown, and resulted in the widespread contamination that flax farmers fought to prevent.

This situation is further complicated by the fact the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has few records of this history and has no intention of issuing any statements to set the record straight. The CFIA did not exist when Triffid flax was registered in 1996 and has no official records from that time. The CFIA was in force to deregister Triffid in 2001 but says it has no mandate to issue information to the public about the flax contamination crisis. This lack of government mandate is one problem that Bill C-474 could correct.

The biotech industry is additionally sowing seeds of confusion by touting an industry voluntary recall of pedigreed seed of Triffid flax in 1998-2000. ("Protocol for Testing Pedigreed Seed for the Presence of GM Flax in Canada", January 2010, Dale Adolphe, Canadian Seed Growers Association).

But this recall did not change the official status of Triffid as legal seed, nor did it stop seed growers from reproducing Triffid. Whatever the seed industry says about a voluntary recall, this step was obviously not enough to protect flax farmers from GM contamination (and in 2001, there was still Triffid seed that needed crushing).

The fact is that Bill C-474 would have required an assessment of export market harm before sale of Triffid seed was permitted. The result of this analysis would have been the conclusion that flax farmers had already reached, and has now come to pass: GM Triffid flax would destroy Canada's biggest export market of Europe, where we send 60-70% of our flax.

Still to this day, there is no mechanism to evaluate the economic risk of a GM technology, no government mandate to stop the sale of GM seeds that could destroy our export markets, and no protocol for recalling approved seeds in order to try to stop contamination.

GM Flax Timetable

Though the CFIA has refused to issue any public statements about the flax crisis, CFIA officials have verified the below timeline of events produced by the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network :

GM Triffid flax was approved for commercialization via variety registration in 1996, making the seeds legal to sell in Canada. Variety registration remained until April 1, 2001 when it was removed at the behest of flax farmers. Additionally, the last of 200,000 bushels of Triffid seed worth at least \$2.5 million was not rounded up from farms across the Prairies and crushed until early 2001. ("GM Flax Seed Yanked Off Canadian Market - Rounded Up, Crushed" by Jason Warick, The StarPhoenix, June 23, 2001).

- **1996:** GE "CDC Triffid" flax granted environmental release approval from Agriculture Canada (The CFIA was not yet formed).
- **1996:** Triffid flax was approved for animal feed – animal health assessment and worker health and safety, handling – by Agriculture Canada.
- **1996:** Triffid flax was granted variety registration by Agriculture Canada, making it legal to sell the seeds.
- **1998:** Health Canada approved Triffid for human consumption.
- **2001 (April 1):** Triffid was deregistered by the CFIA, making it illegal to sell the seeds in Canada.

For more information :

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